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ABSTRACT

Gerontological research appears to indicate that a relatively small percentage of the elderly population of the United States attends any of the nation's senior centers. In order to identify the correlates of senior center participation for a sample of elderly living in a small urban community, elderly male and female center users (N=97) and non-users (N=125) participated in personal interviews. A difference of means test for the four categories of independent variables (need, predisposing, enabling, and informal suport) indicated significant differences among users and non-users for only one variable in each of the need, enabling, and informal support rubrics. A large number of the predisposing variables showed differences between the two groups. Multivariate analyses, however, indicated that not all these variables distinguished between center users and non-users. Reasons for participation identifired by users included something to do, invitations from friends and relatives, and a desire for company or to make friends. Major reasons for non-involvement were being too busy and lack of interest. These findings appear to support the view that a primary function of a senior center is a social one. The differences in results between the simple and multivariate analyses seem to indicate the need for multivariate data analysis. (AG)

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CORRELATES OF SENIOR CENTER UTILIZATION*

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CORRELATES OF SENIOR CENTER UTILIZATION

Gerontological research indicates that a relatively small percentage of the U.S. population age 65 and over attends any of the nation's estimated 5,000 senior centers (U.S. Senate, 1979). One nati survey (Harris, 1977) reported that 18 percent of the elderly had participated in a senior center activity in the past year. Studies done at the local level have generally uncovered lower rates of senior center usage (Krout, 1981; Downing, 1957). While lack of knowledge has been cited as a possible reason for non-participation (Fowler, 1970), research has shown that the large majority of the aged are in fact aware of senior centers (Harris, 1977, Krout, 1982). This would indicate that researchers need to look elsewhere for explanations of nonuse.

This paper reports findings from a study designed to identify the correlates of senior center participation for a sample of elderly living in a small urban community. A greater understanding of the factors underlying this phenomenon will contribute to an improv planning and provision of services to the elderly. The need for up to date data on this topic has grown as senior centers have emerged as important components of the elderly support system and have increasingly been identified as "focal points" in the service delivery network (Leanse, 1981).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A number of previous studies have examined the use of social and health services by the elderly, but their findings have been contradictory and relatively little research has been conducted on senior centers.

Some studies report that variables such as marital status, income, occupation, education, sex, race, and living arrangements do not distinguish between members versus non-members, users versus nonusers, or low usage versus high usage (Silvey, 1962; Storey, 1962; Tuckmann, 1967; Hanssen, et. al., 1978). Other researchers, however, report some socio-demographic variables do indeed differentiate users from nonusers. The national survey mentioned earlier found blacks and women and those with less income and education more likely to have attended a senior center in the last year (Harris, 1975). Schramm and Storey (1961) report use of a senior center to be significantly greater for males and the unemployed while Cottrell (1975) found use of a publicly supported transportation system for the elderly in rural Ohio greater for females, those living alone, and those over age seventy.

Fowler (1970) in a relatively comprehensive study of the participation of the urban elderly in a wide range of programs, reports that greater use of services is found among the elderly with more chronic health conditions, more formal education and higher incomes. Other researchers (Britton, 1958; Hanssen et. al., 1978) report that users of senior center activities report better levels of health than nonusers thus contradicting Fowler. In fact, there is increasing evidence to suggest that senior centers still function primarily as social and recreational settings and are utilized by aged with relatively high levels of health, effective status, and social supports (Hanssen et. al., 1978).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As this author has argued elsewhere (Krout, 1981) much of this

previous research suffers from a number of drawbacks that limit its contribution to gerontological knowledge in general and senior center utilization in particular. The majority of these studies are descriptive and simply document the socio-demographic characteristics of users. Models or theories seldom serve as guidelines for research and are rarely tested. Respondents typically are not given the opportunity to express their own reasons for use or non-use although there have been exceptions (Downing, 1957; Harris, 1975). Research designs generally do not include samples of users and non-users or present multi-variate analyses of data.

The research reported here seeks to go beyond a mere socio-demographic cataloging of senior center user characteristics and employs a conceptual model developed by Andersen and his colleagues (Andersen et. al., 1975; Andersen, et. al., 1976) that has found considerable utility in gerontological research (Mindel and Wright, 1980; Snider, 1980; George, 1981). This model identifies three factors that are presumed to account for service utilization among the elderly: predisposing, enabling, and need. Predisposing variavles are seen as affecting the propensity of an individual to use services. Variables such as age, sex, education, marital status, and living situation are used in this research as indicators of the predisposing factor. Enabling factors facilitate or inhibit the utilization of services should one be predisposed to use them. Income, car ownership, and frequency of car use are used to reflect this factor. Finally, the need factor indicates the level of problems and is operationalized here by self assessment of health and mobility items, number of sick days, and need for transportation.

In addition to these three factors, the present research also includes several variables seen as taping a dimension often neglected in the study of senior center utilization-informal support. As pointed out by the author in an earlier paper (Krout, 1981), previous work has generally not considered if the frequency of interaction (and satisfaction with some) between an older person and informal supports such as children, friends, and neighbors is related to senior center participation. Notable exceptions are papers by Betchill and Wolgemut (1971) who report one half of center participants had been recruited by friends and Hanssen et. al. (1978) who found no differences between center users and nonusers on frequency of social contacts with children or others. Presumably, such contact would serve as an alternative to center participation and one would expect individuals with greater amounts of informal network interaction (at least for children and neighbors) to be less likely to attend senior centers. The relationship between center participation and amount of contact with friends on the other hand, may not follow that pattern. Since individuals may develop new friendship networks or strengthen old ones as a result of center participation, the frequency of contact with friends may be positively related to center use. The frequency of interaction with children, friends, and neighbors is included in this analysis under the label "network interaction" - a fourth dimension. Whether or not an individual desires more contact with each of these three supports is added to the "need" dimension to reflect need for social contact.

METHODOLOGY

The data analyzed in this paper were collected via in depth personal interviews with a sample of age sixty and over residents of a small urban community. The interviews were conducted between November, 1981 and February, 1982 with a 88 percent successful completion rate. Difference of means test and multiple regression were used to identify the variables which differentiate senior centers users and nonusers. To facilitate this analysis, two sub-samples of elderly were interviewed. The first, a sample of 125 center users, was randomly selected from the 1981 master sign in roster of the local senior center. Of these 125 individuals, 97 had attended the senior center in the six months prior to the interview and were identified as current center participants. The remaining 28 were classified as past users and were excluded from the present analysis. The second sample of 125 nonusers was drawn randomly from a list of age sixty and over community residents compiled from the county voter registration lists. The names of individuals who appeared on the center's roster were removed from the nonuser list. The final sample then consisted of 222 elderly.

The senior citizen center studied as part of this project is a not for profit multi-purpose senior center providing recreation, education, health, information and referral, transportation, nutrition, luncheon club, home delivered meals, out reach services as well as a large number of social activities for the elderly. Established in 1967 and funded by the city and county, the center is primarily run by nonpaid staff although a number of employees of the county Office for the Aging have offices there.

Sample

Table 1 presents data for selected background characteris-

(Table 1 about here)

tics of this sample. Seventy percent are female, fifty percent are over age 70 (median age almost 71), almost sixty percent are married and one third live alone. Forty-five percent report annual household incomes of under $7,500 but ninety percent are homeowners The median years of education is 10.8. It should also be noted that respondents show a high degree of residential stability. They have lived an average fifty years in the community and twenty nine years at their present address. All of the respondents were white.

A comparison of these sample characteristics with national data on the 65 and over population (Soldo, 1980) reveals both similarities and differences. The present sample reports lower household incomes but are more likely to own a home and a car than the national elderly average. And while the aged studied here match the national data closely on percent married and age seventy and over, they are more likely to be female and report considerably higher education levels. Finally, the elderly studied in this research show a remarkable degree of residential stability.

FINDINGS

Data reported in table 2 show the results of a simple

(Table 2 about here)

difference of means test for the four categories of independent variables. Significant differences are found for only one variable

each under the need, enabling, and informal support rubrics. Users are less likely to report mobility limitations due to health, have lower incomes, and see their friends more often. A large number of the predisposing variables do show significant differences between senior center users and nonusers. A significantly greater percentage of participants are female, not married, and live alone. They also have an average 1½ years less education. Thus, predisposing factors would appear to be of primary importance in accounting for senior center participation.

A multiple regression analysis was performed to identify the relative importance of each variable and to determine if the controlling procedure invoked by this technique produced any changes in the significance of variables. Data reported in Table 3

(Table 3 about here)

show that, in fact, not all the variables just noted as distinguishing between senior center participants and nonparticipants are related to participation when entered into a multivariate analysis. One variable from each factor is found to have a significant beta and all of these are significant at the .001 level. Individuals who have lower incomes and levels of education, see their friends more often, and desire more contact with their children are more likely to be senior center participants. These four variables explain twenty percent of the variation in the dependent variable. The remaining thirteen independent variables only explain an additional four percent bringing the total explained variance to twenty four percent. Income is the strongest predictor followed by frequency of contact with friends, education, and desire for more contact with children.

Several predisposing variables are no longer significantly related to senior center participation including sex, marital status, and living situation.

Further insight into senior center participation is provided by data shown in Table 4. This table presents the relative frequency

(Table 4 about here)

of reasons identified by respondents for their center participation or nonparticipation. Three reasons stand out as explanations for why individuals got involved with the senior center. These are something to do, invitation from friends or relatives, and desire for company or to make friends. Nearly 50 percent of the responses identified "something to do", twice as many as the second "invitation from friends or others". None of the responses reflect need for assistance. The "for the lunch" category generally does not indicate a nutrition related problem, but rather a desire to participate in the lunch program as a form of social activity.

Only two reasons stand out as major explanations for non-involvement; being too busy and lack of interest. Elderly respondents in other studies have also cited these as reasons for lack of senior center participation (NCOA, 1975; Wagner, 1975). These reasons account for 40 and 20 percent of the total responses while "no need" is third with almost eight percent. Seven percent of the nonusers cite poor health, not feeling "old" enough, or a negative attitude toward the center or its participants. Only two percent cite an enabling factor - lack of transportation. Thus nonparticipation does not reflect to any significant degree several reasons posited by other researchers: negative attitudes

toward the center, lack of transportation, health problems that restrict access, or an identification of the program as being for "oldies" (acceptability).

DISCUSSION

The results of the multivariate analysis of the data are considerably different from those obtained through a simple comparison of means and percentages. None of the previously significant predisposing variables are found to be related to senior center participation and a need variable (desire for more contact with children) emerges as one of the four variables significantly associated with center utilization.

Senior center use is negatively related to education and income. This finding suggests that those of greater means do not need, do not qualify for, or simply are not interested in the services and activities offered at the senior center. It is not surprising, then, that we find nonparticipants citing two major reasons for their lack of center involvement: being too busy and no interest. It seems logical to conclude that those elderly who are better educated and financially well situated have other activities that keep them busy. They can afford to travel or do other things by themselves or with others in more glamorous surroundings than a senior center. Their higher level of education has probably led them to have interests that are not meet in the center setting.

The finding that senior center users report greater contact with friends probably reflects two things. First, for some elderly the center serves as a place of interaction for friendships

that pre-date center participation. This argument is supported by the finding that one-quarter of the participants cite an invitation by friends or others as the reason for why they got involved initially. In fact, center participants are three times more likely to have friends who also attend the center. Second, it is clear that the elderly make many new acquaintances and friends as a result of senior center involvement. Data not reported here show that only nine percent of the users did not make any new friends as a result of center participation, twenty seven percent made a few friends, and sixty four percent state they made many new friends. Thus, greater frequency of contact with friends appears to be both a cause and effect of senior center utilization. It is clear that senior centers both increase and reinforce the elderly's friendship network.

It is also interesting to note that senior center participants express a greater desire for increased contact with children than nonparticipants but are just as likely to visit with their children daily. This finding can be viewed as support for the argument that center users have a greater level of need for social activity and contact. The senior center may fill this need at one level (friends and acquaintances) but does not adequately serve as a substitute for contact with children. Two hypotheses concerning the relationship between senior center involvement and social interaction are suggested by these findings. First, it may be that elderly individuals participate in senior centers to compensate for a shortage of informal network linkages. Second, it may not be an absolute lack of such contact, but rather a need for higher

than average levels of socialbility that leads to center involvement. The data would appear to support the second supposition.

In any event, it would appear that these findings on informal network interaction support the view that a primary function of a senior center is a social one. The reasons cited by participants in table 4 overwhelmingly are expressive of a desire for social and recreational activities and contact and further illustrate the importance of social activity or interaction as an explanation for center use. Concomitantly, the most frequently cited reason for nonparticipation implies a satisfactory perhaps even too demanding level of social activity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study presented findings on the relationship between predisposing, enabling, need, and informal network interaction variables and senior center participation. In addition, data on respondent identified reasons for participation/nonparticipation were also analyzed.

Center users were found to be of lower status than nonusers in terms of income and education, have more contact with friends, and to desire more contact with their children. Their reasons for center involvement reflected a desire for social contact that was interpreted as indicative of insufficient social contacts (for them) or a desire to expand existing friendships or make new ones. Non-participants, on the other hand, did not get involved primarily because they were too busy or not interested. This indicates they had sufficient levels of interaction or simply did not find the idea of a senior center appealing.

It is noteworthy to point out that the present study clearly demonstrates the need for multivariate data analysis and the usefulness of supplementing traditional closed-ended interview items with open-ended ones. The reported differences between center participants and nonparticipants on income and education but not on other variables such as sex, age, marital status, and health related measures suggest more systematic research needs to be carried out to determine more precisely how different complexes of variables influence this phenomenon. Finally, findings from the present study support the observation that senior centers serve largely social or recreational functions. The nature, meaning, and consequences of these social support functions for the elderly clearly deserve more detailed examination.

TABLE 1

SELECTED BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS
OF ELDERLY RESPONDENTS (N=222)

Characteristic	
Sex	
% male	30
% female	70
Age	
% 60-65	20
% 66-69	26
% 70-74	28
% 75 or older	25
median age	70.8
Marital Status	
% married	58
% widowed	30
% never married	8
% divorced	4
Living Arrangement	
% live alone	34
% live with others	66
Annual Household Income	
% less than $5,000	20
% $5,000-7,499	25
% $7,500-9,999	22
% $10,000-14,999	21
% $15,000 or more	12
Education	
% 8 years or less	32
% 9-11 years	24
% 12 years	30
% 13 or more years	14
median years	10.8
Length of Residence	
median years in community	58.4
median years at present address	29.4
Home Ownership	
% own	90
% rent	10

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF SENIOR CENTER PARTICIPANTS AND NONPARTICIPANTS

	Particiant	Non-Partici-pant	t/Z*	Signi-ficance
NEED				
% poor health	55.6	58.0	.02	.985
% no sick days	75.0	82.9	1.50	.151
% limited mobility	17.7	29.9	2.14	.033
% lack transportation	15.0	11.2	1.29	.166
% desire more child contact	32.1	21.0	1.67	.096
% desire more friend contact	9.3	14.5	1.18	.240
% desire more neighbor contact	10.3	7.3	.78	.435
PREDISPOSING				
mean age	71.5	70.0	1.84	.067
% female	76.3	62.1	3.35	.001
mean years of education	9.7	11.2	4.45	.000
% married	48.5	70.2	3.35	.001
% live alone	42.3	22.6	3.19	.002
ENABLING				
% income 10,000 & up	16.7	38.7	4.50	.000
% own car	78.4	83.1	.88	.378
% use car daily	56.6	61.0	.59	.557
INFORMAL NETWORK INTERACTION				
% visit children daily	30.0	30.3	.01	.990
% visit friends daily	50.0	36.1	2.67	.015
% visit neighbors daily	20.8	17.5	1.25	.169

* Differences for age and education were tested by a two-sample t-test and the Z approximation differences in proportions test was used to test differences in the percentage variables. Significance levels are for a two-tailed test of a null hypothesis of no difference.

TABLE 3

Beta Coefficients Showing the Relationship Between Selected Independent Variables and Senior Center Participation

Independent Variables	Beta Coefficient
NEED	
% poor health	-.103
% no sick days	-.045
% limited mobility	.112
% lack transportation	-.038
% desire more child contact	.144*
% desire more friend contact	-.042
% desire more neighbor contact	.065
PREDISPOSING	
mean age	.011
% female	.101
mean years of education	-.230*
% married	No
% live alone	.030
ENABLING	
% income $10,000 & up	-.228*
% own car	-.080
% use car daily	-.024
INFORMAL NETWORK INTERACTION	
% visit with children daily	-.028
% visit with friends daily	.226*
% visit with neighbors daily	.021
R	.489
R^2	.239

* Significant at .001 level
NO-Variable not entered into equation due to low F value

TABLE 4

REASONS FOR
PARTICIPATION/NONPARTICIPATION IN SENIOR CENTER

Reason	Percent of Responses*
Why Get Involved	
Something to do	47.3
Friends or others invite	24.3
To be with people/make friends	16.7
For the trips	6.2
For the lunches	4.2
Spouse was going	1.4
Why Not Get Involved	
Too busy	40.3
Not interested	19.4
No need	7.6
Don't feel old enough yet	6.9
Health or spouse's health	6.9
Don't like center or participants	6.9
Prefer to be alone	6.2
Spouse won't go	3.5
No transportation	2.1

*Percents do not add to 100 because of rounding

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